

September 21, 2008
Matthew 20:1-16
God's Just Not Fair

It was getting late in the game. There was only about a minute left to play. Our head coach walked intensely back and forth, back and forth... thinking... strategizing... thinking and strategizing some more. And that's when he looked over at me, his eyes were burning... and he told me in a rough voice, "Wheeler - get in the game." I hopped up out of my seat and ran out onto the court, our home team's basketball court. I was in junior high and it was my turn to help the team out, our junior high basketball team.

Of course, most of the other players out there playing basketball were taller than me... quite a bit taller than me... but that didn't deter me. And of course, this was our last game of the season and I'd yet to step out onto the court all season long until this point in time... but that didn't deter me either. And of course, we were twenty-five points down with only about a minute left to play in our last game of the season... but that didn't deter me. I had been a bench-warmer all season long. A couple of my other friends on the team too – we were bench-warmers. Rarely, if ever, getting out on the court. But this was finally my chance to let someone else warm the benches. I was ready to play.

The other team wound up having the ball for what must've been 59 of those last 60 seconds of this last game of the season. That one second that our team had the ball, I was dribbling it. And I quickly had the ball stolen from me before I even knew what hit me. We obviously lost the game.

As our team went back into the locker room I looked at our team's faces. The ones who had been out on the court for the longest looked tired and weary, dejected, down on themselves. The bench-warmers, the several of us who hardly ever got out onto the court, the ones who didn't have to work nearly as hard, looked pretty fresh, ready for a whole other season to begin. In the end, we all received the same reward. A very bad losing record.

We get those dejected looks in our reading from Matthew this morning. We get some people who put their hearts into it, putting so much of themselves into it. And then we get some bench-warmers, some people who wind up putting about a minute or so of themselves into the game. Those who were dejected and down. And those who had been warming the benches.

In our reading from Matthew this morning, Jesus tells us a parable. He tells us that the kingdom of heaven is like a person who goes out and hires some helpers in his vineyard. The owner of this vineyard wakes up early in the morning, goes into town and finds a bunch of people who will work for him throughout the day. He goes out and gets these early-birds. These are the ones who really invest themselves into their work. These are the ones who would work all day long to get a day's wages. These are not the bench-warmers. They want to get out there and work hard. They pour out their energy all day long in the vineyard. They all agree to work for a day's wages.

But then the owner of this vineyard doesn't just stop there. He goes back out into the town at about 9 o'clock in the morning and finds some more helping hands. He finds

some more people to help work in his vineyard. And they all agree that the owner will pay them whatever is right.

But the owner of this vineyard doesn't stop there either. This is where things start to get a little strange. He goes back into town at about noon and does the same thing. These are not exactly the early birds at this point. These are the ones who are pretty late in the game to make much of a difference out there. It's noon. They agree though that the owner will pay them whatever's right.

The owner of the field still isn't done yet. Really strange. He goes back to town at about 3 o'clock in the afternoon. Asks some people to help work in his vineyard. He goes back again at about 5 o'clock in the evening. The day's supposed to be over with by that point. These other people at 3 o'clock and especially 5 o'clock – these are the bench-warmers... they're just now getting into the game, getting into the vineyard to help all those who had been working since 6 o'clock in the morning. The owner of the vineyard and these bench-warmers agree to the right wages.

And at the end of the day, which is in probably about fifteen minutes after the owner of the field hires these folks at about 5 o'clock, the owner does something that just doesn't make any good sense. You might be familiar with it. The owner of the vineyard pays all the workers the same day's wages. They all receive the same reward. The bench-warmers and the early-birds all receive the same reward.

Those who had been working all day long, those who had poured out all their energy and strength since 6am, in the end, wind up feeling down. They have dejected looks on their faces. They feel like they've lost. As they saw the owner of the vineyard giving out a full day's wages to the workers who came at 5 o'clock in the evening and worked for about a minute, these early-birds thought they'd receive much more than that. But they wind up receiving the same wages – the wages they had agreed to way back early in the morning.

So, this owner of this vineyard is crazy, right? He's going to go out of business soon, right? He'll go bankrupt sooner or later if he keeps operating this way. Pretty soon, the hardest workers in the vineyard who work all day long will go on strike or something.

Either this owner is crazy, or he's just playing by different set of rules. Maybe the owner of this vineyard doesn't go out hiring all these workers because of what they're going to do for him, working in the vineyard. Maybe the owner of this vineyard goes out bringing workers into his vineyard because of what he can do for them.

This owner doesn't really seem too interested in squeezing all of the work he can get out of these workers. He's interested in sharing what he's got, sharing it with all those who would be willing to come into his vineyard, all those who would gather with him in his vineyard. The owner simply wants to give... to give and give and give.

He doesn't put any limits on who can come into his vineyard. Early-birds. Bench-warmers. Anyone and everyone's welcome to come into his vineyard. And maybe what he has to give could be able to be seen in the faces of some of those in the vineyard. That joy. And maybe what he has to give, or who he has to give, Jesus, would be seen in our faces strong enough that he would be known through us... all over the place. Amen.